

Obituaries

Ray Hill, 'citizen provocateur' who fought for gay rights and prison reform, dies at 78

By [Harrison Smith](#)

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Ray Hill, a onetime Baptist evangelist and convicted cat burglar who galvanized the gay rights movement in Houston, helped organize the first gay march on Washington and drew on his own experience behind bars to host a radio call-in show for inmates and their families, died Nov. 24. He was 78.

Mr. Hill died at Omega House, a Houston hospice center that he had helped establish in the 1980s as a refuge for AIDS patients. He had congenital heart defects and had lost his left leg and part of his right foot because of diabetes.

After being hospitalized earlier this year as a result of his heart problems, he “decided to go off most of his medications,” said his friend Richard Nevilles. “With help, he could get into a wheelchair, and that’s not who he was or how he wanted to live.”

Mr. Hill was a towering figure in Houston, where his funeral was held Sunday on the steps of City Hall and his death was met with [a statement from Mayor Sylvester Turner](#), who called Mr. Hill a “warrior” in the fight for “for gay rights, human rights [and] criminal justice reforms.”

Raised in nearby Galena Park, where he was quarterback of the high school football team and tried to upstage his senior prom by joining the communist revolution in Cuba, Mr. Hill turned from preaching to stealing and was sentenced to 160 years in prison on burglary charges. He successfully appealed the sentence and, after a little more than four years, was released in 1975 for good behavior, leading him to embark on a four-decade career as an activist and rabble-rouser.

“I was born to rub the cat hair the wrong direction,” Mr. Hill once [told the Houston Chronicle](#). In [a separate interview](#), when asked to describe his primary occupation, he called himself “a journeyman-quality hell-raiser.”

In 1987, Mr. Hill successfully took the city of Houston to the U.S. Supreme Court, where he won the right to interrupt police officers on First Amendment grounds. He had been arrested five years earlier for shouting “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” while cops confronted his friend, [according to the New Yorker](#). When Mr. Hill was described in the court’s decision as a “citizen provocateur,” he adopted the description as a formal title and had it printed on business cards.

While his focus was on grass-roots efforts in his hometown, he developed a friendship with Harvey Milk, the San Francisco gay rights activist and city supervisor, and partnered with him to organize the 1979 [National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights](#).

“We only got about 80,000 people to D.C., but no one had ever seen that many queers in one pile in history,” Mr. Hill once quipped, [according to the Houston LGBTQ magazine OutSmart](#). A second march he helped coordinate, in 1987, drew 200,000 people to Washington and was considered the largest gay rights demonstration in history.

An occasional stage performer who did one-man autobiographical shows, Mr. Hill partied with writers Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams and spent much of his professional life as a radio broadcaster. At KPFT-FM, a Pacifica radio station he co-founded in Houston, he served as a station manager and started a program on LGBTQ issues.

When he received the occasional death threat from anti-gay listeners, OutSmart reported, he replied by giving callers directions to the station.

In 1980, he created “The Prison Show,” which featured muckraking reporting on the Texas prison system as well as a novel call-in segment, in which families updated inmates with holiday greetings or family news, including the scores of children’s soccer games and birth or death announcements.

At the time of the show’s creation, Texas prisoners were effectively unable to call home. Mr. Hill later lobbied for a 2007 law that enables most of the state’s inmates to call relatives.

His work on the air dovetailed with his efforts as an organizer, which took off in 1977 when he led a Houston demonstration against Anita Bryant, whose platform as a singer, beauty pageant winner and orange juice spokeswoman made her one of the country’s most prominent opponents of homosexuality.

While Bryant headlined the Texas Bar convention at a downtown hotel, Mr. Hill led a crowd of several thousand protesters — far more than the hundreds he had envisioned — in chants of “Go home, Anita” and “Equal rights now.”

“That night was to me the revelation my dreams were not wasted,” Mr. Hill said. In a 2016 interview with the Chronicle, he recalled telling demonstrators, “You have the strength of character, and the worth of soul and spirit to carry you through the rough times — and times will get better for all of us.”

Mr. Hill went on to organize an event known as Town Meeting 1, which resulted in the creation of LGBTQ community centers in Houston, and created street patrols designed to put an end to summertime beatings of gay men in the city. Among the most prominent was the 1991 murder of a young gay man named Paul Broussard. Mr. Hill helped draw attention to his murder and later angered some fellow

activists when he befriended Broussard's killer, Jon Buice, and insisted that it was less a hate crime than a drunken mistake.

He also campaigned on behalf of Houston politicians such as Kathryn J. Whitmire, who became the city's first female mayor in 1982, and Annise Parker, who became its first gay mayor in 2010.

His efforts occurred in a city that was simultaneously home to one of the largest gay communities in the Southwest and a fierce brand of Bible Belt conservatism, in which mayoral candidate Louie Welch, speaking into a [hot microphone in 1985](#), replied that one way to curb AIDS would be to "shoot the queers."

Raymond Wayne Hill was born in Houston on Oct. 13, 1940. His parents were labor activists — his mother organized nurses for the Teamsters, and his father organized shipyard workers for the AFL-CIO — who brought him up in a household where Saul Alinsky, Samuel Gompers and John L. Lewis formed a kind of left-wing Trinity.

When he came out as gay while in high school at Galena Park, his mother was relieved, Mr. Hill recalled. "She said, 'Well, we notice you dress up more than the other boys in the neighborhood, and we thought you were trying to pretend to be wealthier than we are, and we were afraid you might grow up to be a Republican. So if you're gay, we can handle that.'"

Mr. Hill had previously served as an itinerant evangelist, traveling the countryside until, at the age of 17, "I decided that was dishonest work and I gave that up and took up more honest work. I became a burglar."

He never graduated from college but said he stole "jewelry, antiques, art — you know, stuff queers really like," before being arrested in 1970 and imprisoned.

When his older sister Mary died in a car accident in 1977, Mr. Hill raised her two children. He leaves no immediate survivors, Nevilles said.

"I believe that life is service. And service is its own reward," he told the Chronicle. "When you die, they're not gonna gather around your coffin and talk about what wonderful things you did for yourself. I'm just trying to give them something to talk about."

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Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago.

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